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ABSTRACT

Texas's Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders), which was developed in cooperation with the National Institute of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, and U.S. Department of Education's Office of Correctional Education, began in 1985 as a two-city pilot program to place parolees in jobs. Project RIO has since expanded steadily and now employees more than 100 staff members in 62 offices who provide job placement services to nearly 16,000 parolees annually in nearly every county in Texas. Project RIO serves parolees through full-service offices in Texas' seven largest cities, balance of state offices in smaller jurisdictions, and itinerant service providers. Six months before their release, inmates participating in Project RIO receive the following services: assessment and testing; assistance in gathering employment-related documentation; job readiness training; assistance in completing self-paced employability and life skills workbooks; and a 65-day life skills program. The following services are provided to inmates after their release: outreach, recruitment, and intake; job preparation; job placement; and follow-up services to meet medical and various personal needs. Project RIO has placed 69% of more than 100,000 ex-offenders since 1985. Participation in RIO is a statistically significant predictor of post-release employment. Efforts to replicate the RIO model in Georgia are now under way. (Six contact persons and three World Wide Web sources of additional information are listed.) (MN)

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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
National Institute of Justice

Program Focus

National Institute of Justice
National Institute of Corrections
Office of Correctional Education

Texas' Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders)

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NIJ–NIC–OCE Collaborate on Offender Education and Training Programs

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the National Institute of Corrections (NIC), and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Correctional Education (OCE) have cooperated on a number of projects. These continuing efforts are described below.

This Program Focus, *Texas' Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders)*, is one in a series of publications sponsored by NIJ, NIC, and OCE that focus on various approaches to offender job training, placement, and retention.

More than 3 years ago, in response to a call from policymakers and corrections professionals, the three agencies embarked upon a collaborative effort to document these approaches. As "vendors" of the information developed, the agencies have been overwhelmed by the "consumer" demand for descriptive program information and by requests for training and technical assistance in these areas.

NIJ, a component of the Office of Justice Programs, is the research and development arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. NIJ is authorized to support research, evaluation, demonstration programs, and technology development. NIJ has greatly expanded its initiatives—largely as a result of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (the Crime Act)—and its partnerships with other Federal agencies and private foundations. Often with partners, the Institute sponsors special projects and research and development programs designed to improve and strengthen the criminal justice system and reduce or prevent crime; conducts national demonstration projects employing innovative and promising approaches for improving criminal justice; develops new technologies for use by criminal justice practitioners; evaluates the effectiveness of criminal justice programs; identifies programs that promise to be successful if continued or repeated; and indicates actions that can be taken by Federal, State, and local governments as well as by private organizations to improve criminal justice.

NIC's Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement (OCJTP) was formed 2 years ago as a result of the Crime Act to support job training and placement programs for offenders and ex-offenders. In fiscal year 1997, OCJTP offered two 1-week training sessions for offender employment specialists at NIC's training academy in Longmont, Colorado. Due to the overwhelming demand, in fiscal year 1998 three more training sessions have been scheduled at the Longmont Training Academy. NIC and the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (NOICC) are currently developing a curriculum for a new offender vocational counselors training series to be offered during fiscal year 1999 through NIC's training academy. In addition, OCJTP is planning a national forum of administrators to supervise offender job training and placement programs nationally.

OCE awarded a number of grants under its Life Skills for State and Local Prisoners Program in September 1997. Grants awarded to correctional agencies ranged from $300,000 to $450,000, and program implementation has begun at the selected sites. Work on the development of OCE's *Marketing Guide for Offender Skills* and the *Consumer's Guide to Life Skills Curricula* has been completed.

Other agencies and committees have come on board, too. The recently created Inmate Placement Program Branch (IPPB) within the Federal Bureau of Prisons has developed a strategic action plan to enhance employment opportunities for Federal prisoners. Federal Prison Industries (FPI) has demonstrated its commitment to IPPB's mission and has announced its intention to contract with companies that agree to make provisions to employ ex-offenders. NOICC works closely with all of the agencies involved in expanding employment opportunities for ex-offenders. Currently, NOICC staff are exploring the possibility of importing the U.S. Department of Labor's America's Training Network into Federal correctional institutions.

Finally, the agencies point to collective efforts to assist correctional institutions in replicating the mock job fair concept as a tremendous success. A number of correctional administrators have sponsored mock job fairs in Federal correctional institutions. The Safer Foundation has now incorporated mock job fairs into its overall operation and the Maryland Division of Correction sponsors mock job fairs on a quarterly basis. A number of other States have sought training and assistance to implement similar programs.

As long as the demand for information on offender job training, placement, and retention grows, NIJ, NIC, and OCE will continue to share available resources to fulfill this need. Be assured that the response to this expressed need will continue to be consumer driven. Those on the front lines are encouraged to contact agency staff and share knowledge and experience about promising practices. Your assistance is requested in identifying new approaches to job training, placement, and retention efforts. You are encouraged to be an active partner in the collaborative process.

Jeremy Travis
Director
National Institute of Justice

Morris Thigpen
Director
National Institute of Corrections

Richard Smith
Director
Office of Correctional Education

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Texas' Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders)

by Peter Finn

Sorry it's taken so long to write, but I do have a good excuse. I'm working 7 days a week, 14 hours a day, driving for an appliance store. I deliver appliances for $15 a trip, and I try to do as much as possible each day. I average about $100 a day, saving every cent for a new truck.

When I went for my job interview I told the interviewer up front that I was on parole, but it made no difference at all to him. And for anyone who is interested, Project RIO works. Not only does it help you find a job, they call and talk to the company before you have your interview. Get involved with Project RIO.

When I went to the employment office under Project RIO, it made finding a job easy. I went for two interviews and got one job [with the second company]. But, the first company I applied with has already called me for a second interview and [also] wants to hire me. It starts out at less money, but within a year I'll be making about $35,000 a year, working 5 days a week, 8 hours a day. Once I get enough money together to buy a new truck I may switch jobs.

—Excerpts from a letter from a Project RIO participant to a friend still in prison

In December 1996, the Texas prison system—housing the second largest prison population in the Nation after California—was bulging with more than 132,000 inmates.[1] Not surprisingly, public officials and the State's citizens alike felt it was essential to reduce the number of prison inmates in order to control skyrocketing corrections costs. One way to reduce inmate populations is to reduce recidivism. Project RIO (Re-Integration of

Highlights

From its beginnings as a two-city pilot program in 1985, Texas' Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders) has become one of the most ambitious State government programs devoted to placing parolees in jobs in the Nation. Operating through the Texas Workforce Commission (the State's employment agency), RIO has more than 100 staff members in 62 offices who provide job placement services to nearly 16,000 parolees each year in every county in the State. In addition to its statewide coverage, Project RIO is unusual in the following respects:

- The program provides job preparation services to inmates while they are still incarcerated in State prisons so that they have a head start in postrelease job hunting. At the same time, RIO's prison presence spreads the word to inmates that the program is waiting to help them find work the day they are released.
- Project RIO represents the close collaboration of two State agencies—the Texas Workforce Commission, where the program is housed, and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, whose RIO-funded assessment specialists help prepare inmates for employment and whose parole officers refer released inmates to the program.
- Piggybacking on the good reputation most local Texas Workforce Commission offices have in the business community, Project RIO has developed a pool of more than 12,000 employers who have hired parolees referred by the program.

A 1992 independent evaluation documented that 69 percent of RIO participants found employment, compared with 36 percent of a matched group of non-RIO parolees. In addition, 1 year after release, participants had worked at some time during more 3-month intervals than comparison group members. During the year after release, only 23 percent of high-risk RIO participants returned to prison, compared with 38 percent of a comparable group of non-RIO parolees.

In 1996, Texas had the second-largest prison population in the country (behind California)—132,000 inmates. As a result, public pressure and positive evaluation results motivated the Texas legislature to increase RIO's budget to nearly $8 million. While this was a major increase in RIO's budget, the independent evaluation estimated that the program continually saved the State money—more than $15 million in 1990 alone—by helping to reduce the number of parolees who would otherwise have been rearrested and sent back to prison.

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Offenders) is one major initiative the State has undertaken to help keep ex-offenders from going back to prison. The program began as a two-city pilot program in 1985. (See "How RIO Began: Reducing Recidivism.")

As with similar programs across the country, Project RIO is based on the theory—supported by considerable hard evidence—that if inmates can find a decent job as soon as possible after release, they are less likely to return to a life of crime and to prison. (See "The Employment-Recidivism Link.") Project RIO puts theory into practice, not only by helping ex-offenders in every corner of the State find jobs but also by beginning the placement process while clients are still in prison, long before their release date.

Funded entirely by State general revenues, Project RIO represents an unusual collaboration between two State agencies: The program is jointly operated by the Texas Workforce Commission (the State's employment agency) and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (Institutional and Parole Divisions). Exhibit 1 (page 6) illustrates the relationships between these agencies, as well as the program's staffing arrangement.

Project RIO has been able to work with thousands of incarcerated clients every year and continues to serve most of them after their release. Data show that Project RIO succeeds in placing offenders in jobs (due in part to the State's abundance of employment opportunities) and that it is probably effective in reducing recidivism (since employed, ex-offenders are less likely to reoffend).

How RIO Began: Reducing Recidivism

In 1984, politicians, prison officials, and the general public in Texas regarded the criminal justice system as a revolving door—38 percent of parolees were returning to prison within 3 years. The head of the Parole Division and the chief of job service operations at the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) met with the Governor's staff to propose using a portion of the Governor's discretionary funds to provide specialized employment services to ex-offenders in order to attack the recidivism rate. Parolees were targeted because as long as they were under supervision, they were the most manageable offender population, they were the population that was returning to prison most frequently, and their ranks were smaller than those of probationers.

At the same time, because the Parole Division was having difficulty finding employment for these men and women, it was felt that the Workforce Commission would be more successful. In fact, on its own initiative one local parole office was already collaborating successfully with a local Workforce Commission office to find jobs for parolees. It seemed natural to policymakers to extend this informal collaboration systemwide. As a result, the Governor agreed to fund collaborative experiments in Dallas and Houston, which were selected because they accounted for 40 percent of parolees in the State. The Texas Workforce Commission began operating the pilot sites in 1985 using Federal Wagner-Peyser Act funds channeled through the Governor. Under the Act, the U.S. Department of Labor provides funds to State Employment Security departments, 10 percent of which governors may use to fund private projects targeting services to special populations (like ex-offenders).

An independent evaluation and a study by parole staff conducted in 1987 both suggested that the experimental program—eventually dubbed Project RIO—was reducing recidivism. As a result, when the Federal demonstration funds were exhausted, the principals from the Parole Division and Workforce Commission used the findings to persuade the Texas legislature to fund the program from general revenues. In fact, the legislature voted to provide increased funding to serve Texas' five other largest cities. In 1991, the legislature increased RIO funding further to include not only parolees in the rest of the State but also inmates.

Project RIO Operates Statewide

In some small towns, where everyone knows everyone else, ex-offenders don't have a hope of getting a job without a RIO employment specialist placing a call to stimulate hires.
—Burt Ellison, Project RIO Program Director

Blanketing the State, Project RIO makes job placement services available to every parolee in Texas. More than 100 program staff in 62 sites serve 92 Texas cities and towns. Exhibit 2 (page 7) identifies each service site and the counties each site serves.

Project RIO operates three types of offices:

- **Full-service offices** in each of the State's seven largest cities offer clients a weeklong job search workshop, one-on-one assistance with job placement, use of a resource room (including computers with job listings, telephone books, and telephones), and postplacement followup.
- **Balance of State offices** are in smaller jurisdictions and consist of one part-time to three full-time RIO staff members who work out of the local Texas Workforce Commission office.
- **Itinerant service providers** travel periodically from a Balance of State

The Employment-Recidivism Link

A comprehensive review of available evaluations of offender and ex-offender programs designed to reduce recidivism by means of training, education, and job placement concluded, "Even after 30 years of trying . . . no program—in-prison training, transitional assistance (both in-kind and monetary assistance), or pretrial diversion—has consistently shown itself capable (through a rigorous random assignment evaluation) of decreasing recidivism through labor market-oriented programs, inside or outside prison."[a] An evaluation of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) grantees that provided ex-offenders with remedial education, occupational skills training, job search assistance, or work experience found no difference in employment rates between the ex-offenders and a group of nonoffenders.[b] Shortcomings in the research methods used to evaluate other initiatives to bring offenders into the labor market make it difficult to conclude that the efforts improved employment or reduced recidivism among ex-offenders.[c]

However, a study of the use of income supplements[d] confirms previous findings[e] that ex-offenders with jobs commit fewer crimes than ex-offenders without jobs and that those with higher earnings commit fewer crimes than those with lower earnings. In view of the potential benefits of helping ex-offenders secure well-paid employment, several job training and placement programs for inmates and ex-offenders have incorporated innovative or more comprehensive features in an attempt to achieve greater success than previous efforts to reduce recidivism.

■ The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) in New York City places ex-offenders—most just released from boot camp—in work crews that provide day labor. In addition to daily income, the crews provide structure and help participants develop good work habits. Approximately three-fourths of the 70 program participants who find full-time employment each year (with most jobs paying more than the minimum wage and providing fringe benefits) are still employed at the same job after 1 month. Of these, 50 percent are still working after 6 months.[f]

■ Chicago's Safer Foundation, like Project RIO, reaches many offenders while they are still incarcerated by operating both a private school in the Cook County Jail in Chicago and a work release center for the Illinois Department of Corrections. The foundation uses a small-group, peer-based approach in its in-prison and postprison basic education skills program, and it provides special case managers to help clients address transitional problems for up to a year after they have secured employment. Of 72 participants (out of 84 who were initially enrolled) who completed the course for 16- to 21-year-old ex-offenders, more than two-thirds entered school, vocational training, or employment. Fifty-eight percent maintained their placements after 6 months, and only one participant was convicted of a new crime after 6 months.[g]

■ The Orange County, Florida, Corrections Division provides intensive educational and vocational programs to its jail inmates. The division links programming with direct supervision in facilities that have been designed architecturally to allow maximum direct contact between staff and inmates by removing physical barriers. Inmates can earn valuable privileges if they participate in programming and avoid misconduct. For as long as 18 months after release, inmates who were housed 6 to 45 days in direct supervision facilities with programming were less likely to reoffend than inmates who were housed there less than 6 days.[h]

Project RIO is an especially ambitious and promising venture in this ongoing history of attempts to increase employment among ex-offenders and thereby reduce recidivism.

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b. Finn, M.A., and K.G. Willoughby, "Employment Outcomes of Ex-Offender Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Trainees," *Evaluation Review* 20 (1996): 67–83. See also Bloom, H., L.O. Orr, G. Cave, S.H. Bell, F. Doolittle, and W. Lin, *The National JTPA Study. Overview: Impacts, Benefits and Costs of Title II–A*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Abt Associates Inc., 1994.

c. McDonald, D.C., D.T. Rodda, S.H. Bell, and D.E. Hunt, *Transition Services and Supervision for Released Prisoners: Implications of Research Findings for Program Development*, draft report prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Abt Associates Inc., 1995.

d. Berk, R.A., K.J. Leinihan, and P.H. Rossi, "Crime and Poverty: Some Experimental Evidence from Ex-Offenders," *American Sociological Review* 45 (1980): 766–786.

e. Harer, M.D., *Recidivism Among Federal Prison Releasees in 1987: A Preliminary Report*, unpublished paper, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Research and Evaluation, Federal Bureau of Prisons, 1994. Anderson, D.B., R.E. Schumacker, and S.L. Anderson, "Releasee Characteristics and Parole," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 17 (1991): 133–145.

f. Finn, P., *Successful Job Placement for Ex-Offenders: The Center for Employment Opportunities*, Program Focus, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1998, NCJ 168102.

g. Finn, P., *Chicago's Safer Foundation: A Road Back for Ex-Offenders*, Program Focus, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1998, NCJ 167575.

h. Finn, P., *The Orange County, Florida, Jail Education and Vocational Programs*, Program Focus, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1998, NCJ 166820.

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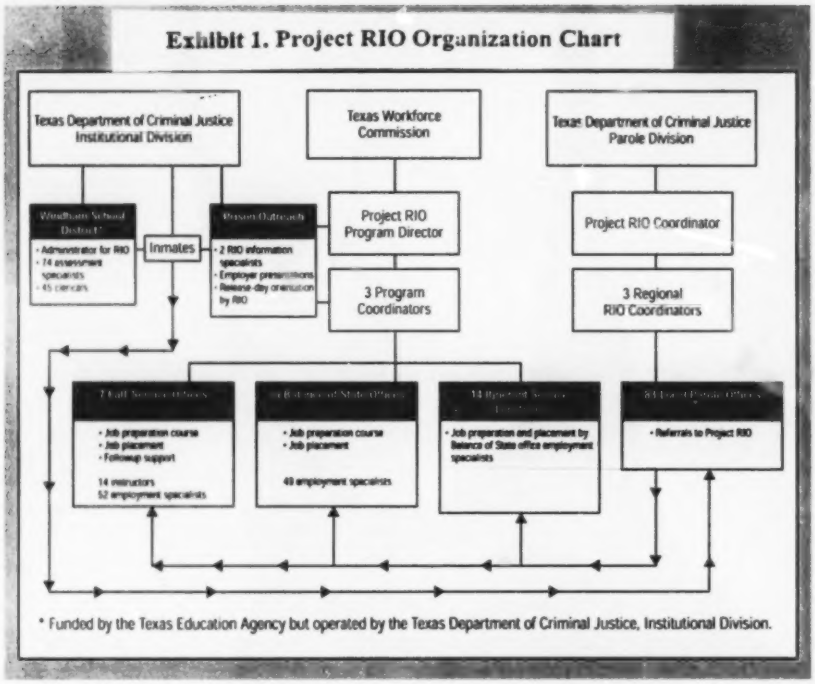
Exhibit 1. Project RIO Organization Chart


Texas Department of Criminal Justice Institutional Division
Texas Workforce Commission
Texas Department of Criminal Justice Parole Division
Windham School District*
• Administrator for RIO
• 74 assessment specialists
• 45 clericals
Inmates
Prison Outreach
• 2 RIO information specialists
• Employer presentations
• Release-day orientation by RIO
Project RIO Program Director
3 Program Coordinators
Project RIO Coordinator
3 Regional RIO Coordinators
• Job preparation course
• Job placement
• Followup support
14 instructors
52 employment specialists
• Job preparation course
• Job placement
48 employment specialists
• Job preparation and placement by Balance of State office employment specialists
• Referrals to Project RIO

* Funded by the Texas Education Agency but operated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Institutional Division.

office to spend 1 or 2 days a week in communities where there are a substantial number of parolees.

Project RIO's first point of contact, however, is in the State's 108 prison facilities.

Prison Programs

Six months before release, Mr. Fulp [a RIO assessment specialist in one of the prisons] finds out about your work history, skills, and how you get along with people. He even sent information about me to a company that manufactures school buses, because I went through mechanic training here. So when I'm released, I'll go to RIO to get an interview with the company. Mr. Fulp and RIO helped me realize that the sooner I get a job, the less likely I'll be to go back to a life of crime.
—Prison inmate

Project RIO starts serving offenders while they are still in prison to help them develop the skills and attitudes they will need to find and keep a job outside prison and to give them a head start in their search for employment the moment they hit the streets. The program's prison activities also serve an important outreach function by spreading the word that RIO is waiting to help every inmate after release. Interested inmates formally enroll in RIO while still in prison.

Project RIO's principal presence in prisons is through the Windham School District, which is a school operating within the State's prisons. Funded by the Texas Education Agency, Windham provides education and training within Texas Department of Criminal Justice facilities through a memorandum of understanding. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice oversees Windham's performance in terms of inmate participation in educational programs.

Project RIO funds salaries for 74 Texas Department of Criminal Justice assessment specialists, 45 clerical staff members, and 1 administrator. In the prison units, these RIO staff members are under the direct supervision of the Windham principal, working in close collaboration with Windham teachers, counselors, and other staff members. The Windham/Project RIO team provides inmates with the following services:

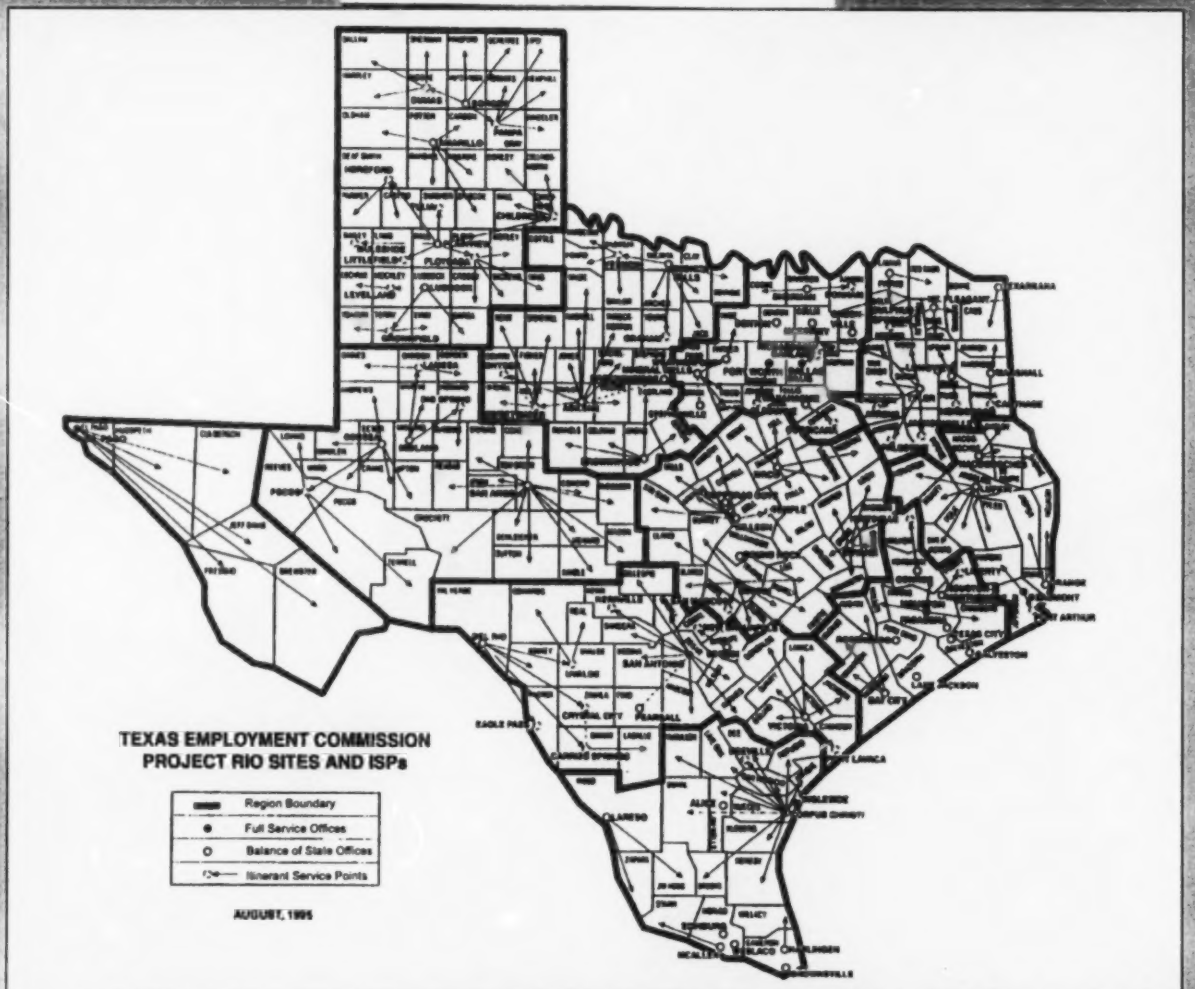
- **Assessment and testing.** Evaluating each participant's skills and work history, a RIO assessment specialist develops an employability development plan that reflects the availability of jobs and occupational demands in the community where the inmate will be released. The specialist also refers RIO participants to appropriate academic or vocational programs within the facility.

- **Documentation.** Assessment specialists gather birth certificates, Social Security cards, General Education Diplomas (GEDs), and school transcripts, either by asking family members to get them or by writing or telephoning for the documents themselves.

- **Job readiness training.** A specialist meets with every RIO enrollee who is within 2 years of release; they meet every 90 days thereafter to hone the inmate's job interviewing skills.

- **Employability and life skills workbooks.** Under a specialist's supervision, inmates work at their own pace, completing a series of seven workbooks, called PROD (Project RIO Occupational Direction).

Exhibit 2. Project RIO Service Locations



■ **Changes program**. The Windham School offers a 90- to 120-hour, 65-day life skills program to RIO participants who are within 6 months of release. Taught by Windham instructors, the course consists of six modules that address the following: self-concept (including anger management), family relationships (including parenting responsibilities and techniques), civic and legal responsibilities (including paying taxes), victim awareness (including domestic violence), personal health and hygiene (including signs of substance abuse), and job preparation (including job search and interviewing skills). The course is taught through lectures, discussions, books, and newspapers. According to one student, "Changes was good—it taught me things like how to get life insurance and start my own business, and it taught me how to survive in the normal world."

Inmate exposure

Texas inmates learn about Project RIO in a variety of ways:

■ A RIO assessment specialist distributes RIO brochures to all new inmates during prison orientation.

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Photo by Project RIO

A Project RIO assessment specialist in the Texas Hightower Prison helps an inmate get a head start in considering his postrelease job options and in choosing prison courses he can take to fulfill his job interests.

■ Inmates who enroll in Windham's vocational courses are also required to enroll in RIO.

■ RIO assessment specialists recruit eligible inmates to participate in the Changes program using a short videotape that presents interviews with former inmates whom RIO helped find well-paying, nonmenial jobs.

■ Project RIO's two information specialists—both former drug-involved offenders—periodically provide presentations about the program to inmates.

■ Some RIO employment specialists visit prisons accompanied by employers who talk about both the RIO clients already working for them and their interest in hiring other qualified ex-offenders through RIO. (See "Some Employers Spend a Day in Prison.")

■ On release day, a RIO staff member gives every group of inmates a 30-minute orientation to RIO, including a card with the RIO hotline that individuals can call to learn about the RIO office nearest them. Joan Goodwin, an information specialist in the Austin office, receives about 150 hotline calls each month.

Some Employers Spend a Day in Prison

"It's very effective when inmates can hear from an employer who's actually hired inmates," Project RIO's Director, Burt Ellison, reports. "RIO staff can go in and talk all day to inmates about job opportunities for ex-offenders, but most inmates remain skeptical." One employer talked for an hour with 5 different groups of more than 40 inmates each. "I get personal satisfaction out of talking with inmates," he said. "Everyone makes mistakes. So I let them know there are opportunities out here for work." Inmates ask him most frequently about his company's wage level. According to the employer, "The inmates were amazed it was so high, especially with bonuses. They also ask whether I have a stable workforce, because they want permanent jobs when they get out."

About these outreach efforts, one ex-offender said, "You hear about RIO all the time when you're locked up. People come in and talk about it; you hear about it again when you're released at Huntsville [the central release processing unit]." Word-of-mouth from other inmates who are themselves RIO participants is often the best outreach strategy.

Benefits to inmates and Project RIO

In 1996, 16,000 inmates participated in RIO. Why? A major reason is the chance to improve their lives after release. However, assessment specialists send all inmates a letter when they are within 5 years of release explaining that the parole board will look more favorably on them if they participate actively in RIO.

In-prison RIO participation also benefits RIO employment specialists. According to Patricia Scott, a supervisor in RIO's Houston office, "Clients who have gone through RIO's in-prison programs—especially the Changes class—are more familiar than other clients with completing résumés, being interviewed for a job, and other job preparation skills. They also have their paperwork already prepared, so we don't have to take the time to secure it." Cathy Boswell, an employment specialist in RIO's Austin office, says, "Parolees who have participated in RIO in prison don't mistrust me as much as other parolees, so it's easier to work with them."

Postprison Services

I got out of prison April 22 [1996], after being locked up for 10 years for robbing a bank at gunpoint. For 3 weeks, I just hung out, reacclimating to society. But I got restless the fourth week and tried to get a job. But nobody called me back. At the same time, my parole officer kept asking me, 'Have you gone to RIO yet?' I thought the program would get me only menial jobs, like heavy cleanup work, but finally I went just to appease my parole officer. [After I completed RIO's 5-day job preparation course] . . . I got the first job I interviewed at, a sales agent at a hotel.
—Project RIO participant

Outreach, recruitment, and intake

Although Project RIO's first contact with clients is usually while they are still in prison, its primary mission is to place participants in jobs after release. Project RIO enrolls parolees (representing 85 percent of all Texas releasees) and inmates released from 2-year jail facilities and serves them while they are under supervision. However, the

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program lacks the resources to also serve Texas' 450,000 probationers.

While some ex-offenders go to RIO offices on their own initiative, most arrive after being referred by their parole officer. Indeed, many parolees go straight from their parole officer to RIO on their release day. Except for active substance abusers and releasees with outstanding warrants, Texas Department of Criminal Justice regulations require parole officers to refer to RIO all unemployed, part-time employed, or underemployed releasees during their initial parole visit and at any other time when unemployment problems develop. However, in practice parole officers exercise considerable discretion about whether to make a referral.

Project RIO Director Burt Ellison estimates that, depending on the parole and RIO offices, anywhere from 10 to 55 percent of referred parolees actually show up. What happens to unemployed parolees who refuse to go to RIO? According to Tony Lyro, formerly the Parole Division's liaison with RIO, "While some of these clients get jobs on their own, most of them are incorrigible releasees from the git-go—they won't take courses, go to substance abuse treatment, or find work. So sooner or later they violate the conditions of release and are returned to court."

Job preparation

As soon as I walked in the front door, I was guided through a clear process. First I took RIO's weeklong job preparation course, where I knew some of the information but learned some new things, especially how to handle being an ex-offender during the job interview. I landed a job at a rehabilitation center because I learned from RIO that I should look the interviewer in the eye, how to answer the question, "Why should we hire you?," and how to explain my past. Then the firm went bankrupt. In the past I would have turned to drugs, but instead I came back to RIO to practice my interviewing techniques again. Two months later, a friend told me to interview at her law firm; I used the techniques I had learned at RIO and landed that job, too.
—Project RIO participant

Photo by Project RIO.

Project RIO participants in the Houston office's resource room use the program's computers to look up current job listings. After identifying promising listings, they can use the room's bank of telephones (not shown) to call for an interview.

Project RIO prepares participants for job interviews through the in-prison Changes program and, when needed, through a weeklong, all-day life skills and job search course given at the seven full-service offices that serve the vast majority of Texas parolees.

Job placement

I always thought RIO made you attend a lot of classes and schooling before they would find you a job. But I was surprised—they got me a job in 3 days. My parole officer sent me here, I interviewed the same day I walked into RIO, and 2 days later I was hired. And you can go back for a part-time job any time; I just did, and I was given some applications that the employment specialist found on the computer while I was sitting in her office. Now, when I go to meetings at the parole office, the other guys ask me, 'How'd you get a job at XYZ?' I tell them, 'RIO got me a job in 3 days. You should go, too.'
—Employed Project RIO participant

Project RIO employment specialists match specific clients with specific job openings on the basis of skills and temperament. While they place some cold calls to employers to pitch RIO clients, the specialists can usually get one of the 12,000 companies that have hired RIO participants in the past—and have been satisfied with the results—to interview new candidates. Program employment specialists also have immediate access to the Texas Workforce Commission's entire database of job openings on their office

Three Satisfied RIO Employers

Kay Lee Cox owns a wholesale and retail lighting fixture supply store in Austin whose 30 sales and warehouse staff members have been serving homeowners and homebuilders since 1972. Looking for employees in 1995, Cox called the Texas Workforce Commission for leads because "the temporaries I had been using just seemed to come and go." Tipped off by the commission, Cathy Boswell, an employment specialist in RIO's Austin office, telephoned Cox and arranged to send over an applicant. Cox says, "I was very impressed by Greg. I grilled him pretty thoroughly. He told me he had been in prison for 10 years but had been in sales before. Greg's been on the sales floor for nearly 5 months now and has performed very well." Greg started at $6.50 an hour but within 2 months Cox increased this to $7.50 with fringe benefits and a sales commission—one month sooner than the typical 90-day probationary period Cox normally uses—because he was working out so well. "Dependability is important to me," Cox says, "and it seems like ex-offenders are ready to settle down. Besides, temporary agencies are getting expensive; RIO is a free human resource service for me." But Greg offers the last word: "Of all the good things RIO does, what makes the program work is companies like this one."

Ralph is the human resources coordinator for two manufacturing plants owned by a Fortune 500 company with more than 15,000 employees nationwide. While a line worker, Ralph had worked without problem side by side with ex-offenders RIO had placed with the company. As a result, when Sue Hatcher, RIO's local employment specialist, called to ask if he would interview some of her clients, he said yes. "I've had real success with them," he reports. "One who's been here a year is now a group leader in charge of a department. He began at $6.25 an hour and is now making $9.39 plus a weekly bonus of between $175 and $202—almost $30,000 a year. After 60 days, he received all fringe benefits. I hired another RIO applicant 8 months ago who had taken a trade course in prison. Anytime I ask him to do something, he does it right away—he never begs off. He even comes to me asking for more things to do. He's been so reliable I made him my test man; I trust him not to falsify his test results, even though everyone's under the gun to get their achievement bonus and reporting a problem slows up the work." The company's local plants currently employ more than a dozen RIO clients. Most stay with the company for at least a year; one has remained for 7 years. "I like RIO because it screens people well and sends good applicants," Ralph concludes. "So I'm more likely to hire RIO referrals than other applicants. The result is that I waste less time than I would have to dealing with people through advertisements."

Wayne Hardin is the personnel manager of a company in Houston that manufactures and installs traffic signs, highway striping, and highway barricades. With 130 full-time employees, Hardin has hired more than 30 Project RIO participants; about 15 were working at the plant in late 1996. Hardin says that originally a Project RIO employment specialist called him out of the blue, explained the program, and asked if he would consider interviewing some clients. Hardin reports, "I was initially apprehensive, but I asked a lot of questions, thought it over for 2 weeks, and then decided to test the waters. I needed qualified and committed applicants, and the RIO caller said she screened her referrals carefully." Hardin adds that he also wanted to do his part to help ex-offenders reintegrate into the community. Mike, one of Hardin's current RIO employees, started out as a general laborer in 1992 working on one assignment exclusively, but then got involved with other parts of the manufacturing process. In 1995, a foreman left the company for another position. Hardin started looking around the area for a replacement—and then caught himself and said, "Hey, we have a good person right here." He promoted Mike to the position. Hardin went one step further, agreeing to the RIO employment specialist's request to spend a day in prison talking to inmates about the availability of work for parolees and the type of work and wages he offered. Hardin has since made visits to two other prisons.[a]

a. Wayne Hardin's feeling that he is doing his part to help offenders reintegrate into the community reflects a number of recent justice initiatives—such as community policing, neighborhood prosecution, and restorative justice—that call for local communities to recognize and be responsible for collaborating with the criminal justice system. To the extent that a RIO-type program fosters this kind of attitude and activity among employers, the initiative contributes to the building of community.

computers. All RIO full-service offices also provide clients with a resource room equipped with computers that have job listings, telephone books, and telephones.

According to Burt Ellison, "The biggest incentive [for companies to hire RIO clients] is that employers know what they're getting through us. When John Q. Public walks in, they don't have a clue." Employers also value dependability; as one reported, "RIO's referrals seem to stay longer than people I hire off the street." (See "Three Satisfied RIO Employers.")

Followup

Many RIO clients have serious social needs, ranging from medical care to shelter, that could interfere with their ability to find or retain a job if left unresolved. Employment specialists provide all enrollees with an up-to-date directory of local social and community services, from medical services for indigent persons to food, clothing, and housing resources. Some RIO employment specialists take a more active role in addressing these needs. Cathy Boswell says, "If they need a GED, I make the appointment to get them enrolled; if they need clothes, I call or write a letter to the Salvation Army." For a client whose broken jaw was wired because of a volleyball accident just before he left prison, Boswell secured free cans of a liquid diet supplement from a local charitable agency, clothing from the St. Vincent DePaul Society, medical care from a

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Photo by Project RIO.

During a break between customers, Gregory Garett, a former Project Rio participant, checks a catalog at the lighting supply store where he has worked steadily as a salesperson since his release from prison in 1995.

hospital (which referred him to an oral surgeon for free removal of the wires), and eyeglasses from the Foundation for the Homeless.

Employment specialists telephone employers at 30-, 60-, and 90-day intervals to find out whether there have been any problems with placed participants, and they encourage employers to call RIO to address any difficulties. When participants lose their jobs due to layoffs or other factors beyond their control, RIO's employment specialists help them find another job. If an employee relapses into drug or alcohol abuse, the specialist works with the parole officer to send the person for 90-day treatment, after which placement services resume.

Interagency Collaboration

Project RIO involves close collaboration between the Texas Workforce Commission and two divisions of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice—the Institutional Division (prisons) and the Parole Division. Although these entities have very different missions—safety and employment—they have a single goal for Project RIO: placing offenders in jobs to save the State money by reducing recidivism. Historically, the closest collaboration has occurred between Project RIO and the Parole Division.

According to Burt Ellison, "Parole administrators have collaborated with us from day 1 because RIO helps them in their supervision—we reduce their workload by taking the burden off them for employment and support services." Nevertheless, as with any effort of this magnitude, initial conflicts between parole officers and RIO did occur.

The most serious problem was that many parole officers would not refer clients to RIO because they doubted that the program's employment specialists could really find jobs for ex-offenders—a population the Texas Workforce Commission had never successfully served. In addition, the Parole Division would not share its employment development plans with RIO offices, claiming that doing so would violate client confidentiality.

Communication

The two agencies took several steps to resolve their initial differences. First, legal counsel was sought and reported that the two agencies working together did not constitute a breach of privacy because any exchange of information was made only with each client's written consent. Then, in 1989, the executive directors of the Texas Workforce Commission and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice signed a memorandum of understanding that detailed each agency's responsibilities, with a major focus on communication. Pursuant to the understanding, the Parole Division appointed Tony Lyro as full-time RIO coordinator—funded by RIO—to handle problems both within the Parole Division and with RIO. Lyro met with every parole office manager, instructing them to stop telling RIO staff members how to operate. He also educated them about what RIO could and could not do. For example, some parole officers resented the fact that RIO would receive credit for placements if clients got jobs on their own after RIO counseling. Lyro told them, "What you don't see is that the parolee received counseling first from RIO in prison and agair at a RIO office. But if the guy loses his job and returns to RIO for another placement, RIO doesn't get any additional credit." At the same time, Burt Ellison provided similar directives and information to RIO office managers.

Two other considerations also promoted collaboration between RIO and the Parole Division. First, according to Ellison, "There was strong buy-in from the top because the heads of the Texas Employment Commission and Department of Criminal Justice knew each other personally, got along well together before RIO was established, and were unusually forward-thinking people who realized the importance of tackling the recidivism problem." Second, Ellison says, "Parole's mission used to be only supervision, but, because of the high costs of maintaining our prisons, the legislature redefined Parole's mission to help clients avoid going back to prison. We help them achieve that new mission."

Degrees of collaboration

According to John Ownby, one of three RIO program coordinators in the central office who share responsibility for monitoring RIO staff members

across the State, "The degree of collaboration between Project RIO and the Parole Division varies among local RIO and parole offices; a lot of RIO's success is based on relationships built between our staff and parole officers." For example, clients sometimes complain to their RIO employment specialists that their parole officers are requiring appointments at times that conflict with the ex-offenders' work hours. RIO employment specialists who are on good terms with parole officers can quickly work out a satisfactory solution. To develop rapport with parole officers in her jurisdiction, Cathy Boswell has arranged lunches with them, gone to their softball games and baby showers, and faxed invitations to a happy hour she sponsored, which was attended by 15 officers.

According to Tony Lyro, "In those sites with good communication and coordination between local RIO offices and parole officers, the collaboration is great: Parole officers do not have to find parolees jobs, allowing them to concentrate their efforts on other supervision responsibilities. But when communication is poor, officers may continue to take responsibility for finding their clients employment because they are not confident that RIO can do the job."

Lyro adds, "In some rural areas, ex-offenders can almost always find jobs because people take care of their own and unemployment is low. That, coupled with the fact that the nearest RIO employment specialist may be 30 miles away, leads some parole officers to help their clients get jobs." However, most parole officers, especially in cities, will not try to find work for parolees who refuse to go to RIO because Project RIO is already the ex-offenders' best possible resource for help in finding a job.

When communication and trust are high, local RIO offices and parole officers work very closely.

■ Some parole offices invite Project RIO staff members to orient new parole officers to the program as part of the officers' standard preservice training.

■ In some smaller jurisdictions where parole officers must travel to serve parolees, if there is a Balance of State office in the town, the RIO staff person furnishes the officer with a desk and telephone at no cost to the Parole Division.

■ One day, an employed RIO participant complained desperately to his Austin-area employer that, because his parole office was going to move him to another county, he would have to start his job search all over again. The employer called the worker's employment specialist, who told the Austin RIO site manager. The manager arranged with the client's parole office supervisor to have the move rescinded.

A little distance between the two agencies may be beneficial, however, according to Ellison. "We prefer not being colocated with Parole Division offices because we have more independence when we're physically separated. We also avoid being seen as a criminal justice agency—we can be the people wearing the white hats. And while we lose some clients because they won't travel from the parole office to a RIO office, forcing them to make the trip helps us screen them for motivation."

Project RIO also works closely with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's Institutional Division. Once again, a productive, collaborative relationship developed.

■ The Institutional Division allows RIO's two information specialists—both ex-offenders—to talk with inmates in prison even though State policy normally prevents former inmates from going back into a prison.

■ The Institutional Division integrates RIO's 30-minute presentation on the program, given to inmates the day they are released from prison, into the morning's prerelease activities, rather than forcing RIO staff to offer it at the end of the session when inmates are so excited about leaving that they cannot concentrate on anything except getting out the door.

Monitoring and Evaluation

A program operating in 62 offices in an area as large as Texas and requiring close working relations with another large bureaucracy (the parole system) cannot be effective without a systematic approach to oversight.

Performance monitoring

Project RIO has an automated data processing and tracking system at the individual office and statewide levels that tracks releasee referrals and status. Data for each client include offense and parole information, referrals for

education and training, test scores, certificates and degrees received, PROD (Project RIO Occupational Direction) booklets completed, family contacts, military service, birth certificate, and other information pertinent to the employability of the client. Every RIO employment specialist can access the information online and update it as needed during a counseling session. Other data in the system include information on each site's number of enrollees and percentage of placements.

Three RIO project coordinators based in Austin—each responsible for one-third of the State—use this information, along with site visits, to monitor every office's performance. For example, coordinators may spot a slippage in the number of parolee referrals or job placements at a site. They first suggest remedial action, such as spending more time at the local parole office to resolve problems. A coordinator visits the site 90 days later to see if the deficiencies have been remedied. If no improvement has occurred, the coordinator works with the Parole Division RIO liaison or local Workforce Commission manager to solve the problem. In addition to these troubleshooting site visits, the coordinators visit every office in their jurisdiction annually for quality control checks.

Although RIO has written operating standards that site offices are expected to follow, the coordinators allow individual sites considerable autonomy in how they operate. According to John Ownby, a coordinator, "No one in the State RIO office has all the answers; we've found local staff doing things differently than they were supposed to—but better." The following examples illustrate how local offices adapted operational procedures to meet their own needs:

■ Project RIO requires its staff to send a form to a client's parole officer if they remove the client from the program (for example, for repeatedly going to appointments under the influence of drugs or alcohol, failing to attend two or three scheduled interviews with employers, or stealing on the job). Ownby learned that the Pasadena office modified the form to include a checkoff section for parole officers to complete and return to the office indicating why a person was not participating—for example, "absconded," "employed," or "moved out of State." Ownby instituted the innovation programwide.

■ "Offices need to be given flexibility to tailor their services to the local job market," Ownby says. For example, employment specialists in the El Paso office may need to tell clients to come in twice a week because quick turnover in the local labor market creates constant work opportunities, while in a small town with only two viable employers, the employment specialist may have to tell clients seeking work to call in only once a month.

While the coordinators make sure that the basic RIO framework is in place in every site, they do not check for rigid adherence to program operating procedures. The most frequent local "framework" problem that coordinators find is staff neglecting to visit parole officers on a routine basis. Sometimes the problem reflects the attitudes of local RIO office managers who discourage these contacts because they feel that an employment specialist who is not at his or her desk is not making placements. As a result, coordinators have to remind the managers and employment specialists that visiting and establishing personal relationships with parole officers is critical to RIO's success.

The Parole Division's RIO coordinator monitors the work quality of his staff. During his tenure, Tony Lyro closely checked monthly referrals to RIO. "If the rate dropped, that was a red flag to see what was going on. Once I noticed zero referrals for 3 months from one smaller office in central Texas. I called the office's RIO coordinator and asked what the problem was. The answer was that parole officers didn't have confidence in the half-time RIO employment specialist. 'She showed no interest in helping us,' they said, and parolees were reporting that she didn't help them either. So I drove to the parole office and met with the five parole officers to hear firsthand about the problem." Lyro then called the RIO regional coordinator at the time, Burt Ellison, and said, "We have a problem." So Ellison also drove to the site and, he reports, "I found—as is the source of 90 percent of these problems—that the Workforce Commission office manager was saddling the RIO staff person with other work, such as Women, Infants and Children (WIC) responsibilities, leaving her no time to handle parole referrals." After Ellison asked the manager to relieve the part-time specialist of these other responsibilities, he and Lyro went back to the parole office together and asked the officers to start making referrals again, with a promise of better results.

Evaluations

Project RIO's raw numbers are a measurement of the program's success.

■ **Service delivery.** During fiscal year 1995, RIO served 15,366 parolees, representing about 40 percent of all ex-offenders (and 47 percent of all parolees) released from prison that year. Program staff consider a parolee to be a client when a work application and employability development plan have been completed.

■ **Placements.** Project RIO has placed 69 percent of more than 100,000 ex-offenders served since 1985. Almost 74 percent of clients in 1995—11,371 parolees—found employment at an average wage of $5.15 per hour (at a time when the minimum wage was $4.25 per hour).[2]

Project RIO clients appear to be much more likely to get jobs than ex-offenders who do not participate in the program. A 1992 study by Texas A&M University found the following:

❑ **Participation in RIO.** Participation was a statistically significant predictor of postrelease employment. Based on a 1-year followup, 69 percent of program participants found employment compared with 36 percent of non-RIO parolees, with both groups of ex-offenders having similar demographic characteristics (age, race, ethnicity) and risk of reoffending (previous offenses, prior incarcerations, academic and vocational educational achievement levels).

❑ **Data on job retention.** Available data were limited to documentation from Social Security withholding records that an ex-offender worked at least 1 day in each of four quarters for 1 year after release. On average, RIO participants worked during 1.8 quarters, while non-RIO releasees worked in 1.1 quarters.

❑ **Minority ex-offenders.** Minorities did especially well in RIO: 66 percent of African-American participants and 66 percent of Hispanic-American participants found employment, compared with only 30 percent of African-Americans and 36 percent of Hispanic-Americans who were not enrolled in the program.[3]

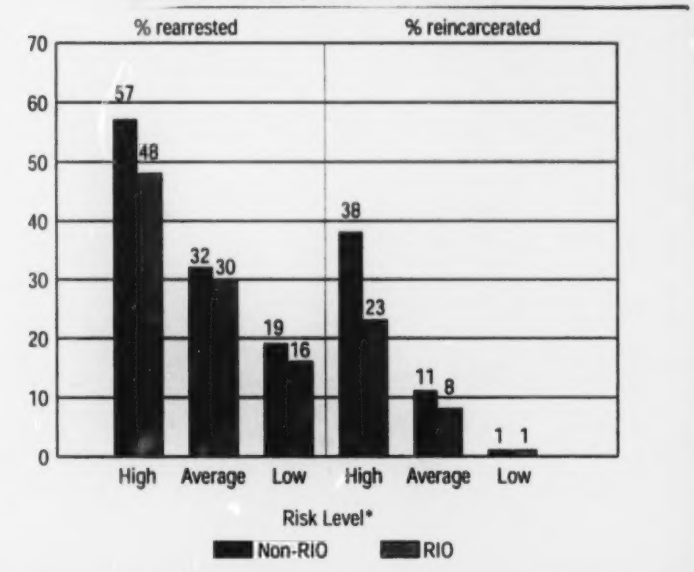
But does Project RIO help prevent recidivism? According to the Texas A&M University study, the answer is yes. Ex-offenders who found jobs through RIO had lower recidivism rates than unemployed ex-offenders who did not enroll in RIO, with demographic factors and risk of recidivism taken into account. In addition, during the year after release, when most recidivism occurs,[4] 48 percent of RIO high-risk clients were rearrested compared with 57 percent of non-RIO high-risk parolees; 23 percent were reincarcerated, compared with 38 percent of non-RIO parolees. (See exhibit 3.) These figures suggest that employment and participation in Project RIO have been of greatest benefit to ex-offenders whom prison and parole personnel consider most likely to reoffend.

The evaluations of Project RIO have several weaknesses. For instance, researchers were unable to determine whether the parolees who were most likely to succeed on their own were the ones who joined RIO. However, the Texas A&M study found few objective differences between RIO participants and nonparticipants and believe that these differences were unlikely to have influenced the positive findings.[5] Furthermore, both Burt Ellison and Tony Lyro believe that if parole officers are being selective in deciding which parolees to refer to RIO, they are probably sending over their worst clients, those least likely to succeed on their own. According to Lyro, "Although parole officers are supposed to refer every unemployed client to RIO, they typically put the most pressure to enroll on high-risk ex-offenders because these parolees need the most help." Ellison adds, "Parole officers are under pressure to come to some resolution with each client, whether a positive or a negative outcome. So they keep urging the parolees who are not adhering to parole plans to go to RIO, so that either these clients will end up finally getting a job or the officers can use the parolees' repeated refusal to enroll in RIO to build a case for applying sanctions."

What does it cost to achieve these results? The 1995 Texas Legislature provided Project RIO with $15.8 million for 2 years. Of this, $4.69 million per year is funneled to the Texas Workforce Commission through an interagency contract with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The department uses $2.9 million per year for its prison- and parole-related Project RIO activities. The program spent $361 in 1995 for every client who found a job.

The Texas A&M researchers examined the records of 6,500 clients who received services in 1990. According to the researchers, nearly 20 percent of

Exhibit 3. Rearrests and Reincarcerations by Risk of Recidivism and RIO Participation (n = 1,200)



* Based on 23 factors, such as substance abuse history, living arrangements, correctional officers' impression of risk, academic level, vocational skills, and employment history.

these avoided reincarceration partly because of their participation in RIO.[6] The cost of incarcerating these individuals would have amounted to about $20 million per year (about $16,000 per inmate per year). Since Project RIO's costs were about $4 million in 1990, this represents potential savings of more than $15 million for the State that year.

The researchers also observed that each ex-offender who worked in 1990 generated about $1,000 in State and local taxes, representing $1.2 million in revenue to the State.

Keys to Success

RIO is one of the few State programs really doing something.
—Texas State Senator

Government self-interest

Many factors account for Project RIO's achievements, but as a State government program, an essential precondition to its survival is satisfying the legislature. Project RIO appears to be in the self-interest of Texás policymakers. Legislators are under pressure to reduce crime and prison costs. By voting to fund Project RIO, lawmakers can tell constituents they are attacking crime and saving taxpayer dollars. Furthermore, once key legislators have agreed to fund a program, they develop a stake in helping it succeed.

Because the entire criminal justice system is ultimately accountable to the legislature, as well as subject to public pressure, reducing recidivism and offender costs becomes a prime concern for the prison system and Parole Division.

Of course, the best possible public relations tool is an independent evaluation that shows the program is working—precisely what Texas A&M provided. As Burt Ellison says, "Governors and legislators wanted hard numbers to be able to show taxpayers that the program was saving money."

Other strategies

Program staff offer other suggestions for ensuring that a RIO-type program will succeed.

- "Avoid complicated policies and procedures; for all parolees who have an employment problem, send them to RIO. Use a simple referral form."

- "Allow flexibility in day-to-day operations at the local office level." The Parole Division gives local offices considerable flexibility in how they handle making referrals to RIO; Project RIO allows a large degree of operational choice among its local offices.

- "Make sure you have control over staffing and then hire staff who will be comfortable working with ex-offenders." Project RIO must accept those employees the Texas Workforce Commission has assigned to the program. Because these staff are not always suitable or interested, this lack of choice has been, and continues to be, a problem for RIO.

Can Other States Set Up Similar Programs?

Project RIO has been assisted by circumstances that may not exist in other States, including high employer

Georgia Attempts to Replicate Project RIO

Ronnie Lane, Director of Parolee Training and Employment for the Georgia Board of Pardons and Parole, chairs a State task force charged with implementing the RIO model.

According to Lane, officials in Georgia were becoming increasingly concerned about the shrinking amount of money available to incarcerate offenders and the escalating costs of incarceration. "Agency administrators began to realize that they had to help one another if they hoped to have any chance of saving money," Lane says. "What attracted us to Project RIO was precisely its ability to get three different agencies with different missions to work together on a mutual concern—getting inmates ready for life after prison."

Georgia has faced different challenges in establishing collaboration than Texas because Georgia's Board of Pardons and Parole is completely independent of its Department of Corrections. As a result, while the task force has already negotiated an agreement between the Board of Pardons and Parole and the Department of Labor, the Department of Corrections has yet to sign the agreement. In addition, the Department of Corrections has recently abandoned its in-prison school system, dismissing its teaching staff and privatizing the operation. As a result, the task force must negotiate with contract teachers and administrators who are no longer prison employees.

Lane says the task force has established two main goals in replicating Project RIO. First, the Department of Corrections and the Board of Pardons and Parole will work together to ensure that—as in Texas—inmates come out of prison with official picture identifications, birth certificates, Social Security cards, résumés, and other documents they and their parole officers must have in hand to begin the search for work immediately upon release. According to Lane, "RIO woke us up to the realization that inmates may get academic and vocational education and may work in prison industries, but no one captures all the essential employment-related documentation and provides it to parole officers to use in helping inmates to get jobs after release." As a result, some parolees beg off finding a job, claiming they cannot look for work because they lack the proper documents. At the same time, idleness and lack of income predispose many of them to slip back into abusing alcohol and drugs and committing new crimes.

Georgia's second goal is to install the State Department of Labor's job search program software—the most up-to-date and comprehensive source of information on job openings in the State—on every parole office computer.

The task force is pilot testing the collaboration in 25 counties of northeast Georgia, where an unusually high percentage of parolees are unemployed. Lane is testing whether parolees who come out of prison with all the necessary documentation find jobs more quickly than parolees without their paperwork in order. Additional initiatives will determine whether Department of Labor county representatives can help parolees find jobs.

Lane reports that very little money is being used to set up the arrangement. While new funds have been allocated for Lane and his two-person staff to operate the collaboration, other State employees will participate as part of their existing job responsibilities.

demand for workers in Texas, lack of opposition from organized labor because of the State's tight labor market, and pressure to address recidivism created by the second highest number of prison inmates in the Nation. In addition, the Texas Workforce Commission has had offices around the State since 1935; because of the Commission's generally good reputation in local communities, the local RIO staff had a head start in receiving employer cooperation.

Although Texas was well suited to initiate Project RIO, other State departments of employment security or corrections could implement a RIO-type program. Hundreds of employers in many other States that do not have such low unemployment rates, such a tolerant organized labor movement, or as many inmates have hired thousands of ex-offenders. The Georgia Board of Pardons and Parole is already implementing aspects of the RIO model. (See "Georgia Attempts to Replicate Project RIO.") If using local employment security offices and staff to provide job placement services is not feasible, Washington State's approach can be adopted—contracting with local community-based organizations throughout the State to furnish job placement services to ex-offenders.

Nonprofit Implementation of the RIO Model

While initially it may seem unlikely, a nonprofit organization might be able to implement a RIO-type program. For example, a government-funded program would have a level of stability that a nonprofit cannot achieve, since

government-funded programs do not have to devote resources to raising money and have access to computer networks and office facilities that nonprofits would have to purchase. However, RIO staff must pay considerable attention to securing and maintaining legislative support, an issue nonprofits do not have to consider. Furthermore, as public officials change and government funding dries up, State-financed programs are sometimes cut despite their good work. Government bureaucratic processes can thwart collaboration attempts. Clearly, nonprofit and government sponsorships can both involve barriers, but Texas' experience demonstrates that these barriers can be overcome with creatively applied collaborative efforts.

Notes

1 . Mumola, C.J., and A.J. Beck, *Prisoners in 1996*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 1997.

2 . Clients placed a second or third time by employment specialists (for example, because they lost their job due to layoffs) are not counted as new placements in RIO's database; there are no duplicate counts.

3 . Menon, R., C. Blakely, D. Carmichael, and L. Silver, *An Evaluation of Project RIO Outcomes: An Evaluative Report*, College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University, Public Policy Resources Laboratory, 1992.

4 . Hoffman, P., and B. Meierhoefer, "Post-Release Experiences of Federal Prisoners: A Six-Year Follow-up," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 7 (1979): 193–216; Beck, R.A., and B.E. Shipley, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1983*, Special Report, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1989.

5 . African-Americans comprised 44 percent of both groups; 21 percent of RIO participants were Hispanic-American, compared with 17 percent of the comparison group; and 35 percent of participants were white, compared with 39 percent of the comparison group. The average age of both groups was 31. The previous offense rates for both groups were also very similar. RIO participants had slightly higher rates of violent crime (24 percent versus 20 percent) and slightly lower rates of drug offenses (22 percent versus 26 percent) than nonparticipants, but the two groups had almost the same rates for larceny and other crimes. The groups' average number of prior incarcerations was almost identical (0.8 versus 0.9). However, other unmeasured factors, such as changes in marital status and family support, might have accounted for some of the program participants' success. Also, the RIO evaluation does not indicate the duration of participants' continuous employment after finding a job compared with that of nonparticipants. Future evaluations of ex-offender job placement programs would be strengthened if they collected these types of information. They would also be improved if ex-offenders were randomly assigned to program participation and nonparticipation. (Of course, excluding some individuals from program participation might be considered unethical, politically unacceptable, or both.) Comprehensive evaluation is an essential component of good program development and implementation. In addition to contracting with an outside evaluator, as Project RIO did, programs should make every effort to devise a comprehensive evaluation instrument for in-house annual evaluation that would help program administrators gain insight into the program's results. Multiple sources of evaluation should be used, including qualitative and quantitative assessments of program effectiveness using information from parole officers, project administrators, employment specialists, and participants. Project RIO's evaluation was conducted in 1992; a more recent study would help confirm and expand previous findings. Despite these limitations, the assessments that Project RIO has conducted remain among the most thorough that are now available in the field.

6 . Because the research design did not involve random assignment of some ex-offenders to Project RIO and some to nonparticipation, the researchers were reluctant to say unequivocally that participation in RIO caused the participants to find employment. For example, because it is possible that RIO participants were more motivated to succeed than ex-offenders who did not enroll in the program, some might have found work even without the program's services.

About This Study

This document was written by Peter Finn, Senior Research Associate, Abt Associates Inc. Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

On the cover: An instructor in the Houston Project RIO office teaches program participants life skills they will need to find and retain a job.

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

The National Institute of Corrections is a component of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The Office of Correctional Education is a division of the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education.

NCJ 168637 June 1998

Sources for More Information

For additional information about **Project RIO**, contact:

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Program Director
Project RIO
Texas Workforce Commission
101 East 15th Street
Austin, TX 78778–0001
Telephone: 512–463–0834
Fax: 512–305–9640

The **National Institute of Justice (NIJ)** is the research and development arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. For information about NIJ's efforts in corrections, program development, and corporate partnership development, contact:

Marilyn Moses
Program Manager
National Institute of Justice
810 Seventh Street N.W.
Room 7114
Washington, DC 20531
Telephone: 202–514–6205
Fax: 202–307–6256
URL: http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij

NIJ established the **National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS)** in 1972 to serve as a national and international clearinghouse for the exchange of criminal justice information. For more information about topical searches, bibliographies, custom searches, and other available services, contact:

NCJRS
P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849–6000
Telephone: 800–851–3420 (8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Eastern time, Monday–Friday)
URL: http://www.ncjrs.org

For specific criminal justice questions or requests via the Internet, send an e-mail message to askncjrs@ncjrs.org.

The **National Institute of Corrections** offers literature searches and free technical assistance on inmate programming. Contact:

NIC Information Center
National Institute of Corrections
1860 Industrial Circle, Suite A
Longmont, CO 80501
Telephone: 800–877–1461

The National Institute of Corrections' **Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement (OCJTP)** was created in 1995 to:

- Cooperate with and coordinate the efforts of other Federal agencies in the areas of job training and placement.
- Collect and disseminate information on offender job training and placement programs, accomplishments, and employment outcomes.
- Provide training to develop staff competencies in working with offenders and ex-offenders.
- Provide technical assistance to State and local training and employment agencies.

For more information, contact:

John Moore
Coordinator
Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement
National Institute of Corrections
320 First Street N.W.
Washington, DC 20534
Telephone: 800–995–6423, Ext. 147

The **Office of Correctional Education (OCE)** within the U.S. Department of Education was created by Congress in 1991 to provide technical assistance, grant funding, and research data to the corrections and correctional education fields. To speak with a program specialist or to be placed on OCE's mailing list to receive grant announcements, OCE's quarterly newsletter, and other publications, contact:

Richard Smith
Director
Office of Correctional Education
Office of Vocational and Adult Education
U.S. Department of Education
600 Independence Avenue S.W.
MES 4529
Washington, DC 20202–7242
Telephone: 202–205–5621
Fax: 202–205–8793
URL: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/OCE

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For the most up-to-date program information, see the agency Web pages:

National Institute of Justice:	***http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij***
National Institute of Corrections:	***http://www.bop.gov/nicpg/nicmain.html***
Office of Correctional Education:	***http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/OCE***

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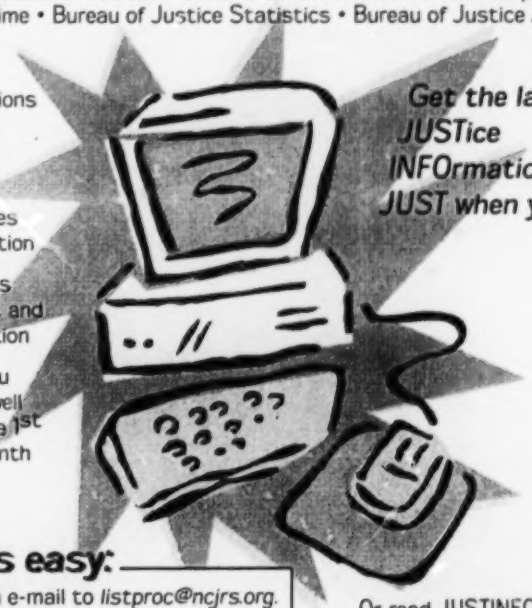

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